

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 20, 2001

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President, NBC Television Network  
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Dear Sirs:

It is with extreme disappointment that we write today in response to the decision by General Electric's National Broadcasting Company (NBC) to become the first major television network in more than 50 years to drop the voluntary ban on hard-liquor advertising. As members of Congress who worked with our colleagues and interest groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving to adopt a national .08 Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) drunk driving standard, we were shocked to learn of your action.

Your network was previously among the other major TV networks which acted as a socially responsible corporate citizen in adhering to self-regulation and resisting the temptation to air liquor commercials to boost advertising revenue. In rejecting liquor advertisements, your network and its competitors deserved the accolades received from consumer and health groups, substance and addiction abuse organizations, and parent advocates.

Why now your change of heart? It is a sad commentary that your bottom line today is more important to your company than the lives of young people tempted to drink or recovering alcoholics trying to beat their disease.

We understand that NBC says it will limit the time liquor ads will run to the prime-time hours of 9 to 11 p.m. Eastern time, as well as during late-night shows *Saturday Night Live* and

*The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. If your time limitation is an attempt to keep children and youth from viewing such ads, you are not being realistic about television viewing habits of the younger generation in today's society. Mr. Leno, to his credit, on December 17 during his nightly monologue, ridiculed his own network about the decision: "NBC announced we are now lifting the ban on hard liquor advertising. For the first time in 50 years, we will be advertising hard liquor on NBC. The peacock is now being replaced by the Wild Turkey...", he said. Does NBC really want to be known as "Nothing But Cocktails," as Mr. Leno mocked?

We also understand that you are setting up guidelines that you believe will ensure that hard liquor is portrayed in a responsible way, including the airing of promotional "social responsibility messages." That window dressing approach may ease your corporate conscience, but we can assure you that it will not satisfy the mom or dad whose teenaged son or daughter sees a sophisticated liquor ad and decides to be "grown up" and go drinking with friends.

The distilled spirits industry was wrong in 1996 to lift its self-imposed ban of 1948 on television advertising and begin airing liquor spots on cable channels. We are very concerned about the growing proliferation of those commercials on local television broadcasts and believe that it warrants congressional review. But NBC and the other major national networks refused to follow suit then, and your decision was the right thing to do. It showed that NBC, as one of the nation's leading and most influential television networks, understood the dangers to our nation's young people of widespread advertising of liquor products.

We also assume that you appreciated what the public reaction might be to a decision to carry liquor ads. If you haven't gauged what the public thinks about liquor advertising on NBC, you may want to pay attention to a national survey released this week which shows that the majority of American consumers oppose the television networks running liquor advertising and agree that such advertising will substantially increase the likelihood of underage drinking.

Our nation has finally started to make some progress in reducing alcohol consumption among our youth, but alcohol use and abuse unfortunately continue in the 12-17 age group. We have enclosed two reports that conclusively demonstrate that alcohol advertising will increase the likelihood of youth drinking. We also have enclosed a summary of several studies on youth drinking, including trends, present levels, and the problems associated with youth drinking including alcohol-related fatalities, suicide, depression, drug use, delinquency, sexual abuse and teen pregnancy. In addition, enclosed is an op-ed article from the December 18 edition of *The Washington Post* by Joseph Califano, president of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University and a former U.S. secretary of health, education and welfare, and a statement by J. Edward Hill, M.D., chair-elect of the American Medical Association, both opposed to your decision.

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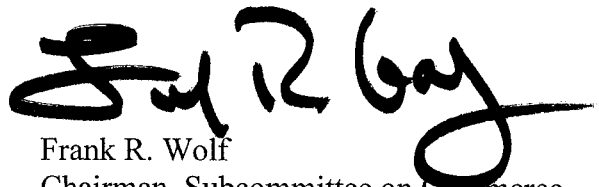
For the health, safety and welfare of the young people of this country who are faced with so many temptations in their lives today, and the moms and dads who never want to have to answer that fateful call in the middle of the night about the fatal car crash, we implore NBC to reverse its decision, reassert its social responsibility, and put back into place its self-regulated ban on liquor advertising.

We would hope that Congress will not have to become involved in this matter, but Congress has a responsibility to protect the public interest and the public airwaves. Therefore, we must be candid and let you know that we are prepared to hold extensive hearings on alcohol advertising on television and to introduce legislation to replace the system of self-regulation of hard-liquor advertising with mandatory federal regulation.

Sincerely,



Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Member of Congress



Frank R. Wolf  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Commerce-  
Justice-State-Judiciary Appropriations